

Citta (1 of 5) Introduction to the Third Foundation of Mindfulness

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Gil Fronsdal

This week, we'll start a new theme: the third foundation of mindfulness. The classic teachings on mindfulness as taught by the Buddha come from a discourse called *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. There are four domains (areas of our life) with which we develop our mindfulness so it becomes strong, clear, lucid, and relaxed. These four domains are the body, the feeling tones of our experience (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), the states of mind that we have, and the *dharmas*, the mental operations and activities with which we either get pulled into the world of suffering or get pulled out of it into the world of freedom.

In June, the theme for one week was the first foundation. In July, there was a week where I talked about the feeling tones. In August, I talked, for one week each, about greed, hatred, and delusion, and their opposites. That series was meant to be a preparation for talking about the third foundation. I feel a little sorry that the talks for this series on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness didn't occur one after the other. But many of you are familiar with the four foundations, so maybe you can pick up here with the third foundation.

I like to think of the four foundations as providing a path. I like the metaphor of depth. I apologize to those of you who don't like this metaphor of going in, going deep. Another metaphor is that of intimacy. With the first foundation, we can be very intimate with our body, but the focus is on the body and the coarser experience. There is an exercise to be aware of the body in activity as we're walking, laying down, sitting, and eating. Other exercises involve reflections on the body – developing a new relationship with the body that is helpful. But we'll say provisionally that it is a little bit coarser attention, more obvious, more something solid that you can maybe connect to.

As we connect to the body and get intimate with it, then we start becoming aware of the subjective experience of pleasant and unpleasant that comes along with being grounded in the body. It's subjective so it's a little bit deeper than the body. The second foundation has to do with the interface between a lot of our inner mental life and the sensations that we experience. We can experience that interface as either pleasant or unpleasant, enjoyable or not enjoyable, comfortable or not comfortable. Now we're getting to something closer, something that is more meaningful and impactful for us because it has to do with pleasant and unpleasant. There can be a lot of pain, for example, or a lot of pleasure that is felt.

Then as we settle into that, we start discovering that there are two different kinds of pleasant and unpleasant. There is that which has to do with the body itself and our ordinary senses. For example, if I pinch myself it hurts, or if I get a massage, it feels good. If I'm sitting in a cold room, I might be uncomfortable. Sitting in a room with a comfortable temperature, I feel that I can relax perhaps. On a cold day, the warmth feels very nice and soothing. So that has to do with stimulating the ordinary senses of the body.

But as we settle in meditation, we also become aware that there's a deeper sense of pleasant and unpleasant having to do with our inner mind state, our inner state of being. In modern language, we might call it our psychology. I like the expression "state of being." I know it is kind of a vague expression and not everyone understands what it means perhaps. It is the quality, the characteristics, of our state of being that is independent of whether the world is providing us with pleasure or pain.

This inner sense of well-being, this state of being, is getting closer, deeper, more intimate with us. As we become aware of it, this state of being is very closely connected to, or maybe it is the same thing as, the state of mind. The state of mind – the Pali word is *citta*. It's a very important word in the teachings of the Buddha.

Citta is sometimes translated as “mind.” Sometimes it’s translated as “state of mind.” Sometimes it’s translated as thinking, thought. That is the constellation of things the word *citta* points to. I like state of mind, quality of mind, or quality of being. It is the overall mood or attitude through which we are aware of things.

For example, if I’m angry, I can be angry as a flare-up in the moment about something in particular. Then it goes away and my basic disposition hasn’t changed. But when my disposition becomes an angry disposition, then we say that the state of mind has become angry. The inner quality, the quality of our being, is characterized by anger. It’s an attitude or a mood that we carry with us that is more enduring than the flare-ups of the moment.

It is the same if I feel tremendous goodwill. That goodwill is not just a momentary goodwill in an encounter that I have. There is a disposition of goodwill that characterizes the state of being, the mood, the state of mind that I have.

For some of you, it might be meaningful to know that some people translate the word *citta* as “heart.” So it is the quality of our heart.

With the third foundation, where we focus on the state of mind, state of heart, or state of our inner being, we’re getting much more intimate. We’re getting into something that’s much more impactful, closer in to what feels most intimate with us, which is not so tied to the vagaries of the changing phenomena in the world. It has a big impact on our mood, our sense of well-being. We might feel a pervasive feeling of dread, a pervasive feeling of greed, or a desperate wanting for something. We might feel a pervasive mood of ill will or hostility. We might feel the opposite of that. We might feel a tremendous mood or attitude of generosity and open-heartedness. We might feel love, kindness, or goodwill. That is the mind state.

As we settle and get quieter – maybe the breathing gets quieter, the body becomes still and quieter – we feel at ease, relaxed, and comfortable enough that we start noticing what stands out in highlight is this inner disposition, this mood, the mind state, the heart state, how we are. Sometimes we discover it is a difficult place. There are all kinds of ways in which people try to avoid their inner life. They don’t want to know it. They stay busy so they don’t feel it because there might be some real sadness or grief there, or something we’re very much afraid of. There might be an inner sense of conflict between the different parts of ourselves.

To start becoming aware of this deeper inner state we have allows a healing to unfold. It allows the purification, a term that’s often used in Buddhism – purifying ourselves of the afflictive states that we have. Buddhism in that sense is very optimistic. It’s very encouraging that it is possible to change ourselves. We’re never stuck in any particular mood or mind state that is afflictive, that harms us, that is difficult to be with. There is a path through it.

Recently, we’ve talked about faith and patience. These are important states and qualities for being able to work with these deeper mind states. To have a lot of faith in the value of practice and enter into it. To have a lot of patience with what is difficult for us. Then it’s possible to work through, open up, or settle the afflictive mind states.

“Settle” is a good term because afflictive mind states involve a certain kind of overactivity of the mind. There is action, activity of the mind, that is generating boredom, hatred or ill will, fear, despair. As the mind gets quieter and stiller, that activity settles away, and we experience ourselves without those afflictive mind states. As we do so, there are two different things that can happen. Either we start making room in our hearts for the opposite of the afflictive states to begin to appear – generosity, love. The other is that the quality, the characteristic, the texture of the mind state itself begins to change, where it starts becoming expansive and open. There starts to be an ease that is related to freedom. It is like the mind, the heart, can now breathe easily because it feels free and unrestricted.

All these are part of mindfulness of the mind state, the third foundation: becoming mindful of mind states that are afflictive, those that are the opposite of afflictive, and those that come as the mind becomes freer and freer. To feel this freedom of mind state, freedom of heart, is one of the important teachers for us on the path of mindfulness. We become our own teachers as we begin recognizing the varied changing states of mind that we’re capable of having and begin noticing and appreciating the states of mind that support the movement toward freedom, wisdom, compassion, and care.

That is the introduction for the theme for this week. I look forward to sharing this important part of the four foundations. To end this talk, I will say that what we’re looking at when we look at the mind state or the heart state that we have is the quality of our inner state, quality of our inner being. It turns out that we are the primary

or maybe the only custodian of our inner well-being. So if we assume other people are the custodian of our inner well-being, and our well-being is dependent on how other people treat us or what they do for us, then that is not a reliable place to find happiness. What is possible with this third foundation of mindfulness is that we can learn to be the custodian of our own well-being.

We'll talk more this week. Thank you very much.